Traditional Cheeses

Belice Valley Vastedda

Stretched-curd sheep's milk cheeses are extremely rare, as they are very difficult to produce. Vastedda, one of the few examples of such a cheese, used to be produced in the Belice Valley during the summer months as a way of salvaging defective pecorino cheeses. In fact, its name probably comes from "vasta", local dialect for faulty or spoiled. Today it is produced with milk from the native Valle del Belice sheep. Vastedda is a highly fragrant and smooth cheese with an intense flavor, which is eaten fresh within a few days of production.

Enna Piacentinu

Comisana, Pinzirita and Valle del Belice are a few of the native sheep breeds that are raised in the hills of Enna, where the pastures are rich with herbal aromas. Since ancient times, their milk has been mixed with saffron grown in the region, or sometimes peppercorns, to make Piacentinu – named after the dialect word meaning "pleasurable." The production methods, which involve adding warm water to the curd and the careful use of salt, produce one of Sicily's mildest cheeses. After being aged for around 60 days, it develops a delicate aroma and a sweet, aromatic flavor.

Nebrodi Provola

This traditional Sicilian Caciocavallo cow's milk cheese is made by cheesemakers in the Nebrodi Mountains, whose pastures are situated largely within the Nebrodi National Park. The size varies depending on the production area, ranging from a kilo in the northwest Nebrodi, to a kilo and a half or more in the central Nebrodi, and up to five kilos in the eastern Nebrodi. It is oval in shape, with the classic head typical of Caciocavallo cheeses (used to tie and hang the cheese for aging). The cheeses have a smooth, shiny skin and are straw-amber in color. Nebrodi Provola can be consumed fresh but the flavor improves with aging, varying from sweet to piquant.

Madonie Provola

This cheese is made within one of Italy's most biodiversity-rich areas, the Madonie Mountains, which lie mostly within the Madonie Regional Natural Park. A typical cow's milk stretched-curd cheese (like its cousin Nebrodi Provola), it is shaped like a rounded flask and has a smooth, thin rind that is straw-yellow in color. The Presidium Provola is made following artisanal methods from raw cow's milk with the addition of a small amount of sheep's milk. A lightly smoked version of the cheese is also made. It can be eaten fresh, but acquires more character and complexity with a minimum aging period of 60 days.

Maiorchino

Made on the Peloritani Mountains in Messina Province, Maiorchino is one of Italy's largest sheep's milk cheeses, with each form weighing between 10 -18 kilos. It is produced from raw sheep's milk with the addition of a small amount of goat's or cow's milk. The complicated production technique includes a long period of poking of the curds with a thin stick known as a "minacino", which is inserted repeatedly into the forms that are then pressed by hand to drain out the whey. Maiorchino is cylindrical with flat or slightly concave sides, a yellow-amber rind that turns brown as it matures and a compact paste that is white tending to straw colored. It is excellent consumed after four months, but can be aged for up to 24 months.

Ragusano

Ragusano (or *scaluni* in local dialect) is a stretched-curd cow's milk cheese produced on the Hyblaean Plateau, where the pastures are rich in herbal and floral aromas. Its origin is linked to the historic breeding of the native Modicana cattle breed, which today is at risk of extinction. A handful of cheesemakers, including one of the Slow Food Presidium producers, still produce it today using only milk from the Modicana. Ragusano is rectangular in shape with rounded edges. Each cheese weighs between 12 to 16 kilograms. The cheese's smooth, thin rind has a yellowish-golden color that deepens as it matures. The compact paste is white to straw colored and displays characteristics such as aging cracks. Ragusano is hung on thick cords for a maturation period of at least four months. When produced outside the PDO (protected designation of origin) area, the cheese is called *Cosacavaddu Ibleo*.

Caciocavallo Palermitano

Caciocavallo produced in the Palermo region is traditionally made from the milk of the Cinisara cattle breed. It is considered to be the best use of the modest amount of extraordinary milk produced by Cinisara cows, which has a good fat content and is rich in aromas due to the vegetation they graze on in the mountains of Palermo. The rectangular forms of stretched curd are matured in cool, natural environments and placed on wooden planks rather than being hung like their heavier and larger cousin, Ragusano. After a full year of aging, the Palermitano exhibits notes of citrus, sage and dried hay, and has a mellow and lasting flavor with a slightly piquant finish.

Sicilian Pecorino

According to experts, this is probably Europe's oldest cheese, and it was certainly the first cheese to be produced on the island. It is made by heating raw sheep's milk and adding lamb rennet. The curd is then broken up into lentil-sized pieces with a *rotula* (a wooden stick) and placed into small baskets that, in some cases, are still made from cane. The unsalted mass is called "tuma", but once the forms have been dry-salted they are called "first salt". After ten days, as production proceeds, they become known as "second salt", then, after successive saltings from around 2 weeks to 2 months, they become known as "semi-mature" (2 - 4 months) and then "mature" (more than 4 months). Pecorino is produced across the island, with slightly different methods used according to the production area. In some cases, whole peppercorns (*pipatu*) are added.

Fiore sicano

Also known as *tinnazzu ri vacca*, there was a time when the production of this mild, soft, cow's milk cheese was almost abandoned. It was originally made, perhaps by chance, from the incomplete fermentation of Canestrato cheese. The curds are first broken up into small grain-sized pieces with a wooden stick called a *rotula*, placed into molds and left to rest. They are then placed into the whey again. After being salted, the forms are aged from 60 days to one year. The mold that grows on the surface of the cheese gives the rind a greyish-green color. The paste is white, soft and compact. The final forms are cylindrical with flat faces and weigh around two kilos. Fiore Sicano is produced in the central area of the Sicanian Mountains, between the provinces of Agrigento and Palermo.

Ricotta

Ricotta is a dairy product that is produced by re-heating the whey that remains after cow's, goat's or sheep's milk is used to produce pecorino, Caciocavallo or other cheeses. The process involves heating the whey after adding a little salt, until white flakes of curdled protein, residual fats, lactose and coagulated mineral salts form. The curds are collected with a strainer and placed into small pierced baskets called *fiscelle* on a sloped workbench to allow them to drain. There are many variations on

the classic fresh ricotta. *Ricotta salata* is made by salting the cheese's surface for 10-20 days, while *ricotta affumicata* is produced by smoking the forms. Aged ricottas, which are matured for up to two months, are ideal for grating. *Ricotta infornata* is produced by placing one- or two-day-old ricotta into ceramic vessels and baking them in an oven for three hours, producing a thin, reddish-brown film on the surface. *Ricotta infornata* can be cooked a second time for 12 hours, in which case it is called "double-oven ricotta". There are a handful of producers who continue to produce an extremely rare form of ricotta that is made by coagulating whey with a fig branch, thistles or wild artichokes, or even using seawater for the salting. Only in Sicily can so many variations of the humble ricotta be found, along with the use of this dairy product in a large number of recipes. Ricotta is an indispensible ingredient for many Sicilian pastry traditions, crucial to cassata, cannoli, cassatelle and many more sweets.

Canestrato

Canestrato is a semi-hard, cooked cheese, made in varying sizes, primarily from cow's milk, sometimes with the addition of goat's or sheep's milk. Production of this cheese in Sicily is mentioned in documents dating back to the 13th century and it seems it was made by cattle herdsmen during the spring to make use of excess sheep's milk at that time of year. When fresh and unsalted, it is also called *tumazzu* or "first salt". Its name comes from *canestri*, the name given to the traditional cane baskets that the curds are placed into, and which give the rind its characteristic markings. The weight varies from 4 to 14 kilos. A variation on this cheese, with the addition of black peppercorns, is *canestrato pipatu*. Canestrato is produced across Sicily.

Caci Figurati

Caci figurati are the animal-shaped, stretched-curd cheeses that a few skilled cheesemakers still produce today, especially around Nebrodi. Made into the forms of horses, hens, calves, deer, goats, doves and other animals, they are not fit for consumption but are mostly used for decoration and to entertain children. They are also an important reminder of the great craftsmanship that is disappearing.

Breeds safeguarded by Slow Food

In Sicily, selective breeding by farmers over the centuries has resulted in hardy breeds, well suited to grazing local wild pastures and able to survive the most difficult and dry periods. They are known to produce high quality milk and flavorsome meat, but are less productive than modern breeds. For this reason, today they are at high risk of extinction. Consuming the high quality cheeses made from their milk and their meat is a great way to support the breeders that are the custodians of these animals and will help ensure their survival!

Cinisara Cattle

The Cinisara is a medium-sized breed that is characterized by its deep black coat, long curved horns in the males and its ability to graze the most inaccessible pastures of the mountains around Palermo. While it only produces about half of the quantity of milk produced by a Friesian, the milk is very high in quality and is used to produce Caciocavallo Palermitano.

Modicana Cow

Modicana cattle are primarily raised in the south of Sicily, in the Hyblaean and Sicanian mountains. It is a large breed with a reddish coat, darker among the males. In the Hyblaean they graze on pastures enclosed by white stonewalls. Here, they are often seen eating the fruit of the carob trees, which are common to the area and provide part of their diet. Rich in casein and high in fat, their milk is used to produce Ragusano and Caciocavallo.

Girgentana Goat

This breed is named after the town of Girgenti (modern-day Agrigento) and is unmistakable for its very long spiraled, or corkscrewed, horns. Its coat and horns resemble wild Asian goats, and according to some its origins can be traced back to the goats of Tibet in the Himalayas. Interesting goat cheeses are made from its milk in the region around Agrigento.

Ragusano Donkey

Farming of this breed is increasing due to the health benefits of its milk, which is very suitable for newborns with intolerance problems, as it is similar to human milk. It is also used in cosmetics. It is a large and very strong donkey, previously used as a form of transport, as well as to turn millstones. Today the breed is also being used in children's educational activities and for riding therapy. The coat is dark reddish-brown with a light-grey middle. They have large eyes surrounded by a ring of white fur.

What are the foundations of an authentic cheesemaking tradition?

PASTURES are crucial to cheesemaking traditions: Each cheese is the product of a region – its climate, vegetation, morphology and so on. The best milk comes from places where wild grasses grow, the flora is rich and diversified, and animals are free to choose what they graze on, therefore allowing them to better meet their needs and increase their wellbeing.
The odor-producing substances in wild grasses are fat-soluble and are transmitted to cheese via the fats contained in milk. Feeding livestock with wild grasses – through grazing on pastures and alpine meadows and using local hay – is an ancient practice that must be preserved.

Cheese traditions rely on the processing of raw milk. In addition to destroying any harmful bacteria, pasteurization destroys good bacteria that are needed to transform milk into cheese, neutralizing the milk and essentially rendering it lifeless. Without the original lactic flora, you get an anonymous product that displays no ties to its region of origin: a homogenized cheese that can be replicated anywhere.
This is why **RAW MILK** cheeses are tastier, more complex and more interesting.

Over time, man has selected the breeds most-suited to milk production and cheesemaking, choosing those that are most productive or have the best quality milk, but above all, favoring breeds that are most-suited to the territory. Today many of these breeds are disappearing. As industry demands high production quantities and standardization, **LOCAL NATIVE BREEDS** have been replaced by "milk machines", to the detriment of the quality and variety of both milk and cheese. Today, breeders who continue their role as custodians of these at-risk breeds need our assistance.

Pastures, raw milk and local breeds: these elements amount to nothing without the **TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE** of cheesemakers: the fruit of creativity, ingenuity and craftsmanship, passed down from generation to generation to allow the production of an infinite variety of cheeses for thousands of years. It is also crucial that we preserve knowledge. With the abandonment of agriculture and breeding, and the disappearance of the generations that hold cheesemaking know-how, we risk losing an entire food heritage.

Sicilian Roots

Sicily's Shepherds and Cheesemakers

They make raw milk cheeses, following traditional methods that have been handed down from one generation to the next, without the use of industrial enzymes. They raise native animal breeds, some of which are at risk of extinction, grazing them on the island's uncontaminated pastures for much of the year. They are the heirs and custodians of a dairy tradition established in Sicily for thousands of years.
To assist them to preserve and pass on this extraordinary heritage, which encompasses culture, biodiversity and pleasure, we must get to know their stories, visit their farms (many offer accommodation and educational activities) and taste and buy their cheeses.
For more information, visit the website:

www.sicilianroots.com

www.sicilianroots.com

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Slow Food Presidia

There are 232 Slow Food Presidia in Italy and more than 200 in 56 other countries around the world.

- The Presidia involve more than **12,000** small-scale producers: farmers, fishers, butchers, shepherds, cheesemakers, bakers and pastry artisans.
- They are **concrete and virtuous examples** of a new model of agriculture, based on quality, recovering traditional knowledge and respecting the seasons and animal welfare.
- They safeguard products that are **good**, high quality and rooted in local cultures; **clean**, produced using sustainable methods that respect the region and the environment; and **fair**, produced with respect for workers' rights and culture, and that guarantee decent incomes.
- They strengthen **local economie**s and promote the creation of a strong alliance between producers and consumers.

Presidio Slow Food®

The "Presidio Slow Food" logo is used on product labels and packaging in Italy to identify producers who are participating in Slow Food Presidia projects and have agreed to a production protocol based on respect for traditions and environmental sustainability.

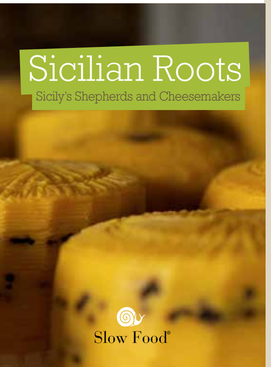
> For more information and for the Presidia producers' contact details, visit the website: **www.slowfoodfoundation.org**

Slow Food Chefs' Alliance

A network of restaurants and osterias that are committed to using local, seasonal and Slow Food Presidia products on a regular basis, and include the producers' names on their menus.

Slow Food Chefs' Alliance

> Find their details on the website **www.slowfoodfoundation.com/alliance** and pay them a visit!



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